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ABSTRACT

The process of conducting needs assessment at State Community College of East St. Louis is described. Among the objectives of the needs assessment are: program and service evaluation, marketing, new program development, and strategic planning. The basic purposes of the needs assessment were curricular planning and development, and several target populations were identifeid to whom curricula could be marketed. Groups selected as part of the needs assessment include: adults living in the community college district, high school students, evening high school students, alumni, and employers. Different needs assessment measures were undertaken for the different groups: (i.e., telephone survey of adults, classroom survey of high school students). The human resources and technical assistance necessary to complete the needs assessment are noted. The approach to conducting needs assessment produced several outcomes, including: college staff working together in a concentrated effort, students obtaining working experiences, the college demonstrating goodwill in communicating with the community, and the college obtaining valuable information as it strives to improve its planning and services to the community. It is suggested that four additional steps should be undertaken: the data and their implications should be discussed with the decision-makers; the college should hold data seminars for significant representatives of each of the target groups: the administrative staff needs to use the data as a base on which to conduct a decision seminar for curriculum development and funds development: and ongoing process of assessing needs should be established. (SW)

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A Process to Conduct Needs Assessment at a Community College

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This paper was presented at the Twenty-First Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Leamington Hotel in Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 17-20, 1981. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Mary Corcoran
University of Minnesota
(Editor, AIR Forum Publications)

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a process used at a community college to conduct needs assessment. The process demonstrates the tradeoffs that exist among method, scope and resources in the completion of this kind of study. In addition, the concept of needs assessment as it relates to marketing programs/services is emphasized.

A PROCESS FOR CONDUCTING NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Introduction

The process of conducting needs assessment described below is currently in progress at State Community College of East St. Louis. This paper summarizes those activities.

Purpose

Needs assessment studies should be conducted for several purposes. Some of these purposes are

1) program and service evaluation

2) marketing

3) new program development

4) data base for commanding local, state, and federal dollars

5) strategic planning

6) reports

Whatever the purpose, it should be clearly defined by significant others in the institution -- that is, those who can convert research into realities.

Scope

The purpose of the needs assessment is integrally related to the scope, the method and the resources that the researcher has to implement the study. At State Community College, the researcher interacted with the President and top administrative staff to discuss the purposes of the needs assessment, the pertinent target populations who should be included in the assessment, and resources required.

Since the basic purposes were curricular planning and development, several target populations were identified to whom curricula could be marketed. The groups selected as part of the needs assessment were

1) adults 18 years of age and older living in the community college district
2) high school students who attended school within the community college district
3) pregnant teenagers in the local public school district's special program
4) students attending evening school at a local high school
5) welfare recipients
6) employers within the community college district
7) current community college students
8) senior citizens who resided within the community college district
9) graduates of the community college from 1978-80

Methods

The scope of the needs assessment outlined above is not a slight undertaking and so the immediate concern was to obtain the human and technical resources necessary to conduct the research. In fact, the lack of resources has resulted in delay of the completion of #1, #2, and #6. The search for resources was directly tied to the methods selected for each of the target populations and means of accessing the population. In brief, here are the methods for each group:

#1) - adults 18 years of age and older would be randomly sampled via telephone
#2) - high school students would be surveyed in their classrooms
#3) - pregnant teenagers would be surveyed in their classrooms
#4) - evening school students would be surveyed in their classrooms
#5) - welfare recipients could not be accessed as a population

#6) - employers would be sent a mail survey which would be followed up by a telephone call to arrange a personal interview

#7) - current community college students would be surveyed in their classrooms

#8) - senior citizens would be surveyed at senior centers within the district

#9) - graduates of the college would be sent a mail survey followed up by a telephone call.

A prime consideration in selection of the methods for each group was the positive impact of personal contact in improving community college relations with the community and with prospective clients of educational services. Other considerations in selecting methods were

1) the ability of the target groups to respond to survey instruments
2) the safety of the environment in which to collect data
3) quality control in data collection
4) low response rate of minorities to mailed instruments
5) racial match between interviewer and respondent
6) costs of methods

Resources

The human resources and technical assistance necessary to completion of the needs assessment were substantial. Since only $2000 was available in the research office, locating and coordinating the resources for the study was a challenge.

Volunteers from the college staff in conjunction with student workers obtained through the student financial aid office conducted personal interviews, group interviews, and telephone follow-ups. College staff mem-

bers and some students provided transportation to data collection sites. College staff and competent student workers keypunched collected data.

Technical assistance was enlisted to perform the following functions:

1) train volunteer staff and students to conduct personal and telephone interviews
2) serve as an outside monitor through each phase of the research
3) conduct computer analysis of machine readable data

A technical assistance consultant who was a former practitioner in institutional research was obtained from a nearby university.

It should be noted that the planning, coordination and administration of resources require a good percentage of time on the researcher's part. Resources are essential to the completion of the needs assessment. For example, the loss of student financial aid dollars during Spring Quarter has delayed the completion of three phases of the needs assessment.

Outcomes

This approach in conducting needs assessment produces several outcomes:

1) college staff work together in a concentrated effort
2) students obtain working experiences beneficial to them
3) the college demonstrates goodwill in communicating with the community and receives favorable publicity
4) the college obtains valuable information as it strives to improve its services to the community
5) the college is better able to strategically plan and take charge of its destiny
6) the college adds to its data base from which to respond to reports and to request funding

Data analysis and the subsequent write-up, however, are not the final steps in the needs assessment. Although State Community College is in that phase for five target groups, at least four additional steps should take place. First, the data and its implications should be discussed with the reality makers. Second, the college should hold data seminars for significant representatives of each of the target groups to

1) conduct needs-resources match analysis
2) eliminate duplication of effort
3) enhance organizational cooperative efforts in improving services to the community.

Third, the college administrative staff needs to use the data as a base upon which to conduct a decision seminar for curriculum development and funds development. Four, an ongoing process of assessing needs should be established for the purpose of refining the planning and responding quickly to the community as its needs change.

Summary

The benefits of conducting needs assessment and the philosophy behind community colleges behoove each institution to embark upon some effort that serves the function of assessing at least educational needs. As with any research, the time and planning spent before data collection is critical to the productive use of the data results to the organization. One undertaking needs assessment must recognize the time, energy, and resource commitment necessary to a successful effort. With this understanding, conducting needs assessment can be a rewarding experience for everyone.